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ABSTRACT

The issue of grade retention and social promotion is still a very controversial topic. The empirical literature assessing the effectiveness of nonpromotion remains mixed. Nonpromotion seems most effective with students in white, suburban, and middle-class school districts. This paper describes a 4-year follow-up to an earlier controlled study by Lenarduzzi and McLaughlin (1990) showing that nonpromotion significantly improved seventh- and eighth-grade students' academic achievement and scholastic effort. The present report evaluated the long-term effectiveness of grade retention and promotion for portions of this same sample, using data gathered over a 4-year period while the students attended junior and senior high school. Of the original sample of 33, 18 student records could be located and examined. All students had attended the same junior and senior secondary school in the school district in rural interior British Columbia, Canada. Results indicated no significant differences for either attendance or grade point average between the promoted and the retained students. In addition, both groups suffered from very high dropout rates. School districts can work with parents of at-risk students and intervene early with skill-based instruction. Possibly, both retained and promoted groups in this study needed building- and system-wide assistance. Until such assistance is provided, the retention/promotion dilemma may be a moot issue. (16 references) (MLH)

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Longitudinal Effects of Nonpromotion in Junior High School

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Abstract

The present research provides a four year follow-up to an earlier study by Lenarduzzi and McLaughlin, (1990). In that earlier study, nonpromotion significantly improved the academic achievement and scholastic effort of seventh and eighth grade students compared to a matched control group who were promoted. The present report evaluated the long term effectiveness of grade retention and promotion for portions of this same sample. Data were gathered over a four year period while the students attended junior and senior high school. Of the original sample (N = 33), 18 student records could be located and examined. The results indicated that there were no significant differences for either attendance or grade point average between the promoted and nonpromoted students. In addition, both groups suffered from very high drop out rates. Suggestions to assist students at-risk for academic failure were made.

Longitudinal Effects of Nonpromotion in Junior High School

The issue of grade retention or nonpromotion and social promotion is still a very controversial topic in the schools. Many school districts have very clear policies regarding the promotion or retention of their students (Smith & Sheppard, 1987).

The empirical literature as to the effectiveness of nonpromotion remains mixed. Holmes and Mathews (1984) carried out an integrated analyses of 44 studies on the topic and reported that nonpromoted students improved less than did their counterparts who were promoted. Later, Holmes (1986) completed a meta-analysis of 17 studies dealing with retention and found similar outcomes. However, Holmes reported that nonpromotion was effective with students in white, suburban, and middle class school districts. This finding was replicated by Marion, McCaul, and McIntire, (1989) who reported that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds showed less improvement than did students from higher socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, students who are retained in school are much more likely to drop out (Frymier, 1990; McLaughlin & Vacha, in press, Vacha & McLaughlin, in press).

Several studies have found positive outcomes with nonpromotion. Baenan and Hopkins, (1989) found that nonpromotion at the high school level generated high rates of performance and also had lower drop out rates than did the control group that was promoted. A similar outcome was reported by Schuyler (1985) using elementary students. These findings remained constant over a three year period of time.

Several studies have reported that little or no benefits can be found when students are retained (Holmes, 1986; Holmes & Mathews, 1987; Niklason,

1987; Smith & Sheppard, 1987). Therefore, the issue of whether to promote or retain students remains open to debate. The purpose of the present research was to examine the long term effects of grade retention and promotion at the junior high or middle school level. Data were gathered up to and including the last year of high school.

Method

Subjects and Setting

The subjects were 18 students who were part of the original Lenarduzzi and McLaughlin (1990) study. Seven students in the control group could be located and 11 students in the experimental group. This students could be tracked through district records to the end of their school career. All students had attended the same junior and senior secondary school in the school district in rural interior British Columbia, Canada.

Design and Data Analysis

A between groups design was employed to assess the long term effects of nonpromotion on academic performance (GPA), school attendance, and dropping out. Students were placed in either the control (promotion) or experimental group (nonpromotion) through a matching procedure.

Data were taken for 18 students at the end of each academic year. These data were gathered from each student's cumulative records. The letter grades were taken from courses in math, science, social studies, and English. Grade point average was calculated on the traditional four point (4.0) scale. Attendance data were taken from the same records. If a student dropped out of school, the number of school days left in the school year (195) were scored as being absent for that period of time. Grade point

average for courses missed were scored as 0.0. The percent of students by group who dropped out of school was also gathered.

Results and Discussion

A Wilcoxon Matched pairs signed ranks test was employed (Siegel, 1957) to determine in any significant differences existed between the groups by year for grade point average and attendance. None of these comparisons were significant. The average grade point average decreased over the duration of the research (1.229 after year one to just .661 by the end of year four. Unfortunately, the mean number of days absent by group also increased from an average of 15.714 after year one to 104.73 by the end of year four. The number of students who dropped out across groups was very high (36% for the promoted group to 42% for the nonpromoted group.

It appears that the long term effectiveness of nonpromotion was not found for either academic performance or attendance. This replicates the work of Marion et al. (1989) and failed to replicate the findings of Baenan and Schuyler (1989). Due to the small number of subjects and the high rate of subject attrition, the present findings need to be viewed with some caution.

The benefits of nonpromotion could be enhanced with the use of several procedures at the building and district-wide level. Once a student is identified as a candidate for retention due to problems in academic performance, tutoring programs, computer assisted instruction, peer counseling could be implemented. Byrnes and Yamamoto (1986) found that nonpromotion paired with prompt remediation was effective and lead to positive student outcomes.

Another issue is the social economic status of the student. Previous research indicates that retention has positive effects for students from

middle class and suburban districts. It may be that students from lower socioeconomic classes do not have parents or caregivers that know the skills to effectively work with the school system to help and assist their children (e. g. Lareau, 1987; McLaughlin & Vacha, in press; Vacha & McLaughlin, in press). Something that the school district can do is to work with such parents so such information and skills are taught and acquired to the parents of students at-risk for school failure. It also appears that it is important to intervene early with skill based instruction for students at-risk for school failure and difficulty (Kinder & Carnine, 1991; Rachal & Hoffman, 1986; Slavin, 1991; McLaughlin & Vacha, in press). In the present analysis, it may not be that some students were retained, but they both groups needed building and system-wide assistance. Until that takes place, which is better,to retain or promote may be a mute issue.

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